Gospel of Mary

The **Gospel of Mary** is a non-canonical text discovered in 1896 in a 5th-century papyrus codex written in Sahidic Coptic. This Berlin Codex was purchased in Cairo by German diplomat Carl Reinhardt.

Although the work is popularly known as the Gospel of Mary, it is not classed as a gospel by some scholars, who restrict the term 'gospel' to texts "primarily focused on recounting the teachings and/or activities of Jesus during his adult life".[1]

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History

The Berlin Codex, also known as the Akhmim Codex, also contains the *Apocryphon of John*, the *Sophia of Jesus Christ*, and a summary of the *Act of Peter*. All four works contained in the manuscript are written in the Sahidic dialect of Coptic.[2] Two other fragments of the Gospel of Mary have been discovered since, both written in Greek (Papyrus Oxyrhynchus L 3525 and Papyrus Rylands 463). P.Oxy. L 3525 "... was in fact found by Grenfell and Hunt some time between 1897 and 1906, but only published in 1983,"[3] by P. J. Parsons.[4]

Gospel of Mary, P. Oxyrhynchus L 3525.

The two fragments were published in 1938 and 1983 respectively, and the Coptic translation was published in 1955 by Walter Till.[5]

Dating the gospel, as with most ancient literary texts, is problematic. As the earliest extant fragment of the gospel (the Rylands papyrus) dates to the early Third Century, it must predate this. Karen L. King, Hollis Professor of Divinity at Harvard Divinity School, suggested that the gospel was composed early in the Second Century, noting that it evidences familiarity with the Gospel of John, and perhaps the letters of Paul, thus likely postdating 90–100

CE.[6] Christopher Tuckett's discussion in his 2007 volume notes Pasquier's preference for a date in the second half of the century; Tuckett himself ultimately opts for a middle position – he places it in the first half of the Second Century but later than King.[7]

The Gospel of Mary is not present in the list of apocryphal books of section five of the Decretum Gelasianum.[8]

The identity of "Mary"

Scholars do not always agree which of the New Testament people named Mary is the central character of the Gospel of Mary. Stephen J. Shoemaker and F. Stanley Jones have suggested that she may be Mary the mother of Jesus.[9] Barbara J. Silvertsen alternatively suggests that she may be a sister of Jesus - an individual who has largely been lost in history.[10] Silvertsen says that while none of the canonical Gospels identify Jesus' sisters by name (Mark 6:3 (https://bible.oremus.org/?passage=Mark%206:3&version=nrsv), Matthew 13:56 (https://bible.oremus.org/?passage=Matthew%2013:56&version=nrsv)), one of his sisters is identified as "Mary" in the Gospel of Philip.[11]

Arguments in favor of Mary Magdalene are based on her status as a known follower of Jesus, the tradition of being the first witness of his resurrection, and her appearance in other early Christian writings. She is mentioned as accompanying Jesus on his journeys (Luke 8:2 (https://bible.oremus.org/?passage=Luke%208:2&version=nrsv)) and is listed in the Gospel of Matthew as being present at his crucifixion (Matthew 27:56 (https://bible.oremus.org/?passage=Matthew%2027:56&version=nrsv)). In the Gospel of John, she is recorded as the first witness of Jesus' resurrection (John 20:14–16 (https://bible.oremus.org/?passage=John%2020:14–16&version=nrsv)); (Mark 16:9 (https://bible.oremus.org/?passage=Mark%2016:9&version=nrsv) later manuscripts).

Esther A. de Boer compares her role in other non-canonical texts, noting that "in the Gospel of Mary it is Peter who is opposed to Mary's words, because she is a woman. Peter has the same role in the Gospel of Thomas and in Pistis Sophia. In Pistis Sophia the Mary concerned is identified as Mary Magdalene."[12] The final scene in the Gospel of Mary may also provide evidence that Mary is indeed Mary Magdalene. Levi, in his defense of Mary and her teaching, tells Peter, "Surely the Saviour knows her very well. That is why he loved her more than us."[13] In the Gospel of Philip, a similar statement is made about Mary Magdalene.[11]

King also argues in favor of naming Mary Magdalene as the central figure in the Gospel of Mary. She summarizes: "It was precisely the traditions of Mary as a woman, as an exemplary disciple, a witness to the ministry of Jesus, a visionary of the glorified Jesus, and someone traditionally in contest with Peter, that made her the only figure who could play all the roles required to convey the messages and meanings of the Gospel of Mary."[14]

Richard Valantasis writes in *The Beliefnet Guide to Gnosticism and Other Vanished Christianities* (see Beliefnet) that the Mary here is Mary Magdalene. Valantasis clarifies that this doesn't "confirm an earthly marriage between her and Jesus – far from it – but it opens an incredible window into the intellectual and spiritual world of the second century C.E." The idea that there would be a gospel from Mary Magdalene is "controversial," however because Andrew objected to the strangeness of Mary's revelations from Jesus. Peter argued, as Valantasis mentions, that "Jesus would not have revealed such important teachings to a woman," and that "her stature cannot be greater than that of the male apostles."[15]

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The most complete text of the Gospel of Mary is contained in the Berlin Codex, but even so, it is missing six manuscript pages at the beginning of the document and four manuscript pages in the middle.[16] As such, the narrative begins in the middle of a scene, leaving the setting and circumstances unclear. King believes, however, that references to the death of the Savior and the commissioning scene later in the narrative indicate the setting in the first section of the text is a post-resurrection appearance of the Savior.[17] As the narrative opens, the Savior is engaged in dialogue with his disciples, answering their questions on the nature of matter and the nature of sin. At the end of the discussion, the Savior departs, leaving the disciples distraught and anxious. According to the story, Mary speaks up with words of comfort and encouragement. Then Peter asks Mary to share with them any special teaching she received from the Savior, "Peter said to Mary, 'Sister, we know that the Savior loved you more than the rest of the women. Tell us the words of the Savior which you remember – which you know (but) we do not, nor have we heard them.'"[11] Mary responds to Peter's request by recounting a conversation she had with the Savior about visions.

> (Mary) said, "I saw the Lord in a vision and I said to him, 'Lord, I saw you today in a vision.'" He answered and said to me: "Blessed are you, that you did not waver at the sight of me. For where the mind is, there is the treasure." I said to him, "So now, Lord, does a person who sees a vision see it <through> the soul <or> through the spirit?"[13]

In the conversation, the Savior teaches that the inner self is composed of soul, spirit/mind, and a third mind that is between the two which sees the vision. Then the text breaks off and the next four pages are missing. When the narrative resumes, Mary is no longer recalling her discussion with the Savior. She is instead recounting the revelation given to her in her vision. The revelation describes an ascent of a soul, which as it passes on its way to its final rest, engages in dialogue with four powers that try to stop it.

Her vision does not meet with universal approval:

> But Andrew answered and said to the brethren, "Say what you think concerning what she said. For I do not believe that the Savior said this. For certainly these teachings are of other ideas."[18]

> Peter also opposed her in regard to these matters and asked them about the Savior. "Did he then speak secretly with a woman, in preference to us, and not openly? Are we to turn back and all listen to her? Did he prefer her to us?"[19]

Interpretation

The Gospel of Mary is often interpreted as a Gnostic text. According to Pheme Perkins, on the basis of thirteen works she has analyzed,[20] the Gospel follows a format similar to other known Gnostic dialogues which contain a revelation discourse framed by narrative elements. The dialogues are generally concerned with the idea of the Savior as reminder to human beings of their bond with God and true identity, as well as the realization of the believer that redemption consists of the return to God and liberty from matter after death. The Gospel of Mary contains two of these discourses (7:1–9:4 and 10:10–17:7) including addresses to New Testament figures (Peter, Mary, Andrew and Levi) and an explanation of sin as adultery (encouragement toward an ascetic lifestyle) which also suit a Gnostic interpretation. Scholars also say that the 5th-century Coptic version of the Gospel is part of the Berlin Codex along with the Apocryphon of John and The Sophia of Jesus Christ which are typically viewed as Gnostic texts. However, while many

scholars take for granted the Gnostic character of the Gospel of Mary, the Gnostic beliefs concerning creation theory and the Demiurge that would suggest an extreme dualism in the creation is not present in the portions currently retrieved.[21]

According to Bart Ehrman, "Mary (Magdalene) is accorded a high status among the apostles of Jesus." Levi actually acknowledges that Jesus loved her more than he loved all of the other apostles. Mary said she had a conversation with Jesus, and Andrew and Peter questioned this. "Four pages are lost from the manuscript", so there is really no way for anyone to know exactly what happened.[22]

De Boer (2004), however, suggests that the Gospel of Mary should not be read as a Gnostic specific text, but that it is to be "interpreted in the light of a broader Christian context". She argues that the Gospel stems from a monistic view of creation rather than the dualistic one central to Gnostic theology and also that the Gospel's views of both Nature and an opposite nature are more similar to Jewish, Christian, and Stoic beliefs. She suggests that the soul is not to be freed from Powers of Matter, but rather from the powers of the opposite nature. She also says that the Gospel's main purpose is to encourage fearful disciples to go out and preach the gospel.

Karen King considers the work to provide

> an intriguing glimpse into a kind of Christianity lost for almost fifteen hundred years...[it] presents a radical interpretation of Jesus' teachings as a path to inner spiritual knowledge; it rejects His suffering and death as the path to eternal life; it exposes the erroneous view that Mary of Magdala was a prostitute for what it is – a piece of theological fiction; it presents the most straightforward and convincing argument in any early Christian writing for the legitimacy of women's leadership; it offers a sharp critique of illegitimate power and a utopian vision of spiritual perfection; it challenges our rather romantic views about the harmony and unanimity of the first Christians; and it asks us to rethink the basis for church authority.[23]

King concludes that "both the content and the text's structure lead the reader inward toward the identity, power and freedom of the true self, the soul set free from the Powers of Matter and the fear of death". "The Gospel of Mary is about inter-Christian controversies, the reliability of the disciples' witness, the validity of teachings given to the disciples through post-resurrection revelation and vision, and the leadership of women."[21]

King also sees evidence for tensions within 2nd-century Christianity, reflected in "the confrontation of Mary with Peter, [which is] a scenario also found in *The Gospel of Thomas*,[24] *Pistis Sophia*,[25] and the *Coptic Gospel of the Egyptians*. Peter and Andrew represent orthodox positions which deny the validity of esoteric revelation and reject the authority of women to teach."

Portrayal in media

- Peeter Vähi's oratorio *Mary Magdalene Gospel* (2010–2011) is based on surviving fragments of the original Coptic text of the Gospel of Mary.
- Mark Adamo's 2013 opera *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene* is based largely on the Gospel of Mary and the Gospel of John. The libretto also includes quotes from the Gospel of Thomas, *Pistis Sophia* and the Gospel of Philip.[26]
- A forgery of the Gospel of Mary Magdalene appears in the X-Files episode "Hollywood A.D."

See also

- List of Gospels

Notes

1. Andrew E. Bernhard, *Other Early Christian Gospels: A Critical Edition of the Surviving Greek Manuscripts*, Library of New Testament Studies 315 (London & New York: T & T Clark, 2006), p. 2. ISBN 0-567-04204-9.
2. Christopher Tuckett, *The Gospel of Mary*, p. 80.
3. *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 27 (2005), pp. 138–48.
4. AD 'P.Oxy. L 3525' (http://www.csad.ox.ac.uk/poxy/papyri/vol50/pages/3525.htm), *Oxyrhynchus Papyri Project*, Oxford University.
5. Walter Curt Till (Editor): Die gnostischen Schriften des koptischen Papyrus Berolinensis 8502, übersetzt und bearbeitet, 1st ed 1955; 2nd ed. by H. U. Schenke, 1971 pp. 24–32, 62–79.
6. Karen L. King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the first woman apostle*, p. 184.
7. Tuckett, C. M. (2007). *The Gospel of Mary* (https://www.worldcat.org/oclc/181737962). Oxford: Oxford University Press. p. 12. ISBN 978-0-19-154973-1. OCLC 181737962 (https://www.worldcat.org/oclc/181737962).
8. *Decretum Gelasianum* http://www.tertullian.org/decretum_eng.htm
9. Stephen J. Shoemaker, *Rethinking the "Gnostic Mary"*, in *Journal of Early Christian Studies* **9** (2001): 555–95; see also F. Stanley Jones, ed., *Which Mary? Marys in Early Christian Tradition*. SBL Symposium Series 20 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002).
10. Silvertsen, Barbara (2010). *The Three Pillars, How Family Politics Shaped the Earliest Church and the Gospel of Mark*. Wipf & Stock. ISBN 978-1608996032.
11. The Gospel of Philip – The Nag Hammadi Library (http://www.gnosis.org/naghamm/gop.html)
12. Esther A. de Boer, *The Gospel of Mary Listening to the Beloved Disciple*, pp. 14–18.
13. The Gospel of Mary (http://www.sol.com.au/kor/7_03.htm)
14. Karen L. King, *Why All the Controversy? Mary in the Gospel of Mary*. “Which Mary? The Marys of Early Christian Tradition” F Stanley Jones, ed. Brill, 2003, p. 74.
15. Valantasis, Richard (2006). *The Beliefnet Guide to Gnosticiam and Other Vanished Christianities* (https://archive.org/details/beliefnetguideto00vala). Beliefnet. ISBN 0385514557.
16. “It should be noted, however, that the above figures do assume that the *Gospel of Mary* was indeed the first work in the codex and that nothing preceded it. This is probably the case (if there were another text preceding the gospel in the codex, it must have been very short), but given the state of existing evidence, one cannot be certain.” Christopher Tuckett, *The Gospel of Mary*, p. 6, n. 8.
17. Karen L King, "The Gospel of Mary Magdalene", in: Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (ed.), *Searching the Scriptures. Volume Two: A Feminist Commentary*, New York: Crossroad, 1994, p. 602.
18. Mary 9:2 (http://www.gnosis.org/library/marygosp.htm)
19. Mary 9:4 (http://www.gnosis.org/library/marygosp.htm)
20. The Prayer of the Apostle Paul, the Apocryphon of John, the Nature of the Archons, the Book of Thomas the Contender, The Sophia of Jesus Christ, the Dialogue of the Saviour, the First Apocalypse of James, the Acts of Peter and the Twelve Apostles, Apocalypse of Peter, Zostrianus, Letter of Peter to Philip, the Gospel of Mary, and Pistis Sophia.
21. De Boer 2004

22. Ehrman, Bart D (2003). *Lost Scriptures* (https://archive.org/details/lostscripturesbo00ehrm). New York: Oxford University Press. p. 35 (https://archive.org/details/lostscripturesbo00ehrm/page/35).
23. King, Karen L, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the first woman apostle*, p. 3.
24. Gospel of Thomas, log. 114.
25. Pistis sophia, 1:36
26. Tommasini, Anthony (June 20, 2013). "The Woman at Jesus' Side, and in His Bed" (https://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/21/arts/music/mark-adamos-opera-makes-a-wife-of-mary-magdalene.html). *Music Review*. New York Times. Retrieved April 1, 2014.

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External links

Details of manuscripts

- *Gospel of Mary (http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/gospelmary.html)* at EarlyChristianWritings.com

Translations

- *Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Text from the Papyrus Berolinensis (http://www.maryofmagdala.com/GMary_Text/gmary_text.html)*
- Syncretic view of *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene* (http://reluctant-messenger.com/gospel-magdalene.htm)
- Gnostic Scriptures and Fragments: *The Gospel According to Mary Magdalene* (http://gnosis.org/library/marygosp.htm)

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